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SCHOOLS

Winchester middle school students to undergo preventative substance abuse screenings

NEIL ZOLOT | CORRESPONDENT

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Students at the McCall Middle School will undergo SBIRT assessments, a process used to screen for alcohol, nicotine, tobacco and other drug use, which is annually required by Massachusetts law. FILE PHOTO

Substance abuse screening interviews with seventh-graders will
McCall Middle School this coming week, from Feb. 3 to Feb. 6.

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The process — known as Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment, or SBIRT — is used to screen for alcohol, nicotine, tobacco and other drug use and is required by Massachusetts law each year.

Passed in 2016 in an effort to curtail substance abuse through prevention and education, requires verbal screenings at two grade levels, seventh and ninth grades. Schools are then required to report screening data to the state Department of Public Health.

"Universal screening is a non-judgmental way to learn about a patient's health and safety risk. Validated questions ask how much individuals use, how often and how substance use impacts their lives," says the program's page on Mass.gov. "About 1 in 4 people screened will be positive for risky alcohol use and about 1 in 5 people screened will be positive for drug use."

Those found with no risk are encouraged to continue to make "healthy choices." Students found to be at risk may be referred to further assessment or care programs.

State law allows a student, parent or guardian to opt out of the screening any time prior to or during the screening process. Requests must be made to schools in writing.

What actually happens?

Screenings take about 5-10 minutes, in which the school's health staff have one-on-one conversations with students. They will ask students about alcohol, nicotine, tobacco or other drug use over the past year and then talk with each student about how to support their overall health, safety and success in school.

If the student needs more assessment or support, health staff ma
with the student and/or their parent and caregiver.

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This is not a blood or urine test, a drug test, or a test of any body function.

Screening results are recorded, but no information that can identify a student is kept (for example, name or date of birth) and results will not go into the student's record. The results will not be shared without the permission of the student or their parent or guardian, but may be shared in the case of immediate medical emergency or when required by state law.

"Substance abuse is not a serious problem among McCall students," said Principal James Lin. "The main reason we are participating in SBIRT is to reinforce healthy habits with our students. We are using a verbal drug screening tool to reinforce healthy habits with students in a one-to-one setting. In the event we do identify a student who is not exercising good judgment with regards to substance use, the SBIRT approach allows our trained screeners to intervene right away in a confidential manner."

In a letter to parents, Lin added, "Parents and caregivers can help their children make healthy choices. One important way to prevent alcohol and drug use is to talk with them about your thoughts and expectations."

Parents were provided with a list of resources and websites.

What are students asked?

Screening questions are about vaping, use of alcohol, tobacco, marijuana and other cannabis products in various timeframes. There's even a question asking students if they've been in a car driven by someone who is high.

Other questions ask about attempts to quit using, cravings, feelin
addiction and moodiness due to use or abstention from use.

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The interviews follow a specific step-by-step process, in which certain answers to certain questions prompt additional questions.

The MASBIRT website says the format "is recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics' Bright Futures Guidelines for preventive care screenings and well-visits" in "version adapted and reproduced with permission from the Center for Adolescent Behavioral Health Research (CABHRe)" and "translated into 28 languages and can be used with students for whom English is not their primary language."

SBIRT is not recommended for use when a student is non-English speaking and the interviewer is not able to conduct the conversation in the student's primary language.

McCall Parents Association President Carey Sue Barney called the screenings "a great preventive measure."

"I don't think we have a particular issue and are the same as other towns with our demographics, but drug use starts earlier than parents think and it can identify kids who might be at risk," she said. "In a community like this where kids have money, they can get things, but it's a problem in general."

Barney also said she has heard no complaints from other parents "and I hear a lot of complaints about things."

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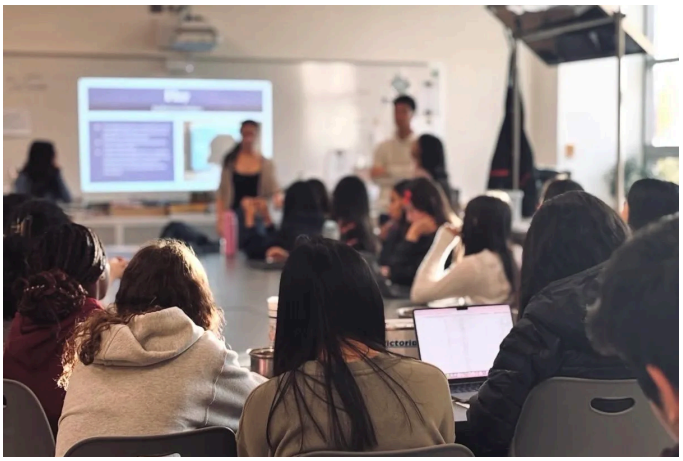
SCHOOLS

Winchester High School club hopes art contest will foster interest in Black history, culture

When then-freshman Christie Clark approached Carson Sarpong about becoming a co-founder for her club, Black Student Union, he was hesitant. Three years later, Sarpong is the president, and the club has organized the Black History Project, a contest that invites students to create art about Black history and culture. The

TAVISHI CHATTOPADHYAY | CORRESPONDENT

February 5, 2026



SCHOOLS

Winchester High School's speech and debate team sees a meteoric rise

Winchester's speech and debate team, like most things, began with only a handful of students competing in its inaugural year and receiving little attention from the school. Yet now, what began as a modest club for fun, has grown into something significant and respected by the entire Massachusetts debate

XIYUE ERIC HAN | CORRESPONDENT

January 30, 2026

SCHOOLS

Winchester High School Athletic Department reschedules open

EVENTS

Winchester High Sch Student Union launches 'Black

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house for 8th graders

The following was submitted by the Winchester High School Athletics Department: On Monday, Feb. 2, the Winchester High School Athletics Department will be hosting its rescheduled open house night for 8th graders from 6:30-8:30 p.m. in the auditorium. Come to an informational meeting, meet the coaches, learn

January 27, 2026

History Project' contest, community showcase

The following was submitted by the Black Student Union at Winchester High School: The Black Student Union (BSU) at Winchester High School (WHS) is proud to announce the launch of the Black History Project, a contest designed to foster education, research, and creative expression surrounding Black history and culture. The

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Celebrate Women's History Month with Girls Leading Change

The following was submitted by the Network for Social Justice: To mark Women's History Month and International Women's Day in 2026, the Network for Social Justice is collaborating with club leaders from Winchester High School and members of the Community Health team from La Colaborativa in Chelsea and

March 4, 2026

NEWS

Winchester School Committee candidates bring contrasting backgrounds to Thursday forum

Two candidates for Winchester's School Committee will face voters at a forum as the district navigates a new literacy curriculum, budget pressures and questions about student mental health. Heather von Mering and John Bellaire are competing for an open seat on the School Committee, which oversees a budget von

WILL DOWD | STAFF WRITER
March 4, 2026

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FEATURES

‘Chicago: Teen Edition’ dances onto the Winchester High School stage

By Talia Ho | Correspondent Fame. Fortune. And all that jazz. This spring, Winchester High School presents “Chicago: Teen Edition,” a bold musical that explores celebrity culture, media manipulation, and the cost of ambition. This iconic production is set in the 1920s. Performances will take place on March 13 and 14

SPECIAL TO THE NEWS
March 4, 2026

EVENTS

Ripley Chapel in Winchester presents ‘Syldason: You Are Welcome Here’

The following was submitted by the Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church: On Friday, March 13, beginning at 7:30 p.m., live in-person and live streamed from the stunning Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church, Winchester, 21 Church St., join in with Syldason, a duo concert featuring Sylvie Zakarian,

March 4, 2026

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